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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
NATIONAL FOREIGN ASSESSMENT CENTER

31 October 1980

MEMORANDUMCUBA: The Mariel Experience

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Summary

The refugee exodus from Mariel promoted by the Cuban Government from April through September 1980 gave President Fidel Castro a modest safety valve to get rid of disillusioned or unproductive Cubans, as well as a lever to try to edge the US closer to the negotiating table. When the exodus threatened to become a negative political factor for the Carter Administration in the presidential campaign--potentially contributing to the success of a candidate who is viewed with grim foreboding in Havana--Castro terminated it. The tactic, however, has not been definitively abandoned. The Mariel experience has taught Castro how sensitive and vulnerable Washington is to a massive, uncontrolled influx of refugees and he can be counted on to resume the exodus--or simply threaten to do so--whenever he believes it politically useful.

To develop the exodus as a potent political tool, Castro needs large numbers of Cubans who are willing to leave virtually all of their material possessions behind and start life over in a new environment. We estimate that there are probably more than a million Cubans in this category; that is, they would be willing to emigrate to the United States if given the opportunity. Cuban officials have claimed privately that some two million (20 percent of the total population) want to leave and have formally registered with Cuban immigration authorities. In fact, with the Mariel sealift terminated, the flow of Cubans leaving the island

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illegally--through the Guantanamo Naval Base, in small boats, and by defecting from transiting aircraft in Canadian and West European airports--is again on the rise, which reflects continuing internal pressures that Castro will have to alleviate periodically.

1. Distressing living conditions, a grim, long-term economic
2. outlook, political and economic discrimination, and disillusionment
3. over unfulfilled promises appear to be the primary reasons why such a sizable segment of the Cuban population has been alienated from the Castro regime. This situation almost certainly will hold true for many years, assuring Castro credibility should he choose to threaten yet another exodus.

For the short term, however, Castro is not likely to take this course. Because an exodus forces him to pay a price in international prestige and domestic turmoil, he will restrict its use only to those situations in which there is significant political or economic advantage to be gained in the context of Cuban-US relations. Moreover, he is likely to wait until after the US presidential elections. In the event of a Republican victory, he will probably take time to assess the new administration before deciding whether to create another confrontation. If he sees his fears of a sharply rightward swing vindicated, he is even less likely to undertake moves that could be used as a pretext for US intervention.

A Democratic victory on the other hand--if not accompanied in subsequent months by some reciprocation for recent Cuban gestures--would increase the likelihood of a unilateral resumption of a refugee exodus as a way of pressing Washington to focus on bilateral problems. Castro expects some reward for having:

- Terminated the Mariel refugee operation.
- Released all US prisoners in Cuban jails.
- Significantly reduced Cuba's anti-US rhetoric.
- Dropped his demand that the US economic denial program--the so-called blockade--be terminated prior to any bilateral talks.
- Resolved the problem of asylees in the US Interests Section in Havana.

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- Acted dramatically to halt aircraft hijackings to Cuba by disgruntled Cuban refugees.

To satisfy Castro, any US reciprocal moves probably would have to include a partial lifting of the embargo (such as on medicines or certain food products), regularizing the refugee flow, and the initiation of broad-ranging bilateral talks on normalization of relations. If the United States responds, the current hiatus in the refugee exodus is almost certain to continue. At the same time, Havana will subtly remind the US that the Mariel experience can be repeated. The Cuban officials who cited the potential of two million more emigrants, for example, may have intended to impress US policymakers with the magnitude of the exodus that could be resumed if some progress is not made toward improving bilateral relations.

Castro has a number of options should he choose to resume pressure on Washington. He could:

- Reopen Mariel for the refugee sealift.
- Open other Cuban ports for this purpose as well, hoping to dilute the effectiveness of the US Coast Guard's Florida Straits patrol.
- Flood the US Naval Base at Guantanamo Bay with thousands of refugees who would quickly overtax the base's facilities and threaten its security (this would also have the effect of focusing world attention on the base itself).
- Harass the US by raising the issues of Puerto Rican independence and the Guantanamo Naval Base in the UN and other international forums.
- Renege on his pledge to return hijackers to the US for prosecution.
- Further exploit the Cuban exile community in the US as a pressure group.

The chances for a resumption of the Mariel refugee sealift in the next several months--and probably into early spring 1981--are slim no matter what the US election outcome. Over the longer term, however, as population pressures in Cuba increase and popular

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disenchantment grows, Castro will be increasingly prone to use unrestricted emigration as a lever against the United States--more so with a Democratic administration and less so with a Republican--as long as bilateral relations remain stalemated.

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